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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001095

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: I WAS KIDNAPPED BY A BUNCH OF AMATEURS

REF: BAGHDAD 0996

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg S. D'Elia for reasons 1.
4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary. Tahseen Sheikhly, Government of Iraq (GOI) spokesman for the Baghdad Security Plan, told USMI and MNFI personnel during an April 1 debriefing that his kidnappers were a gang of amateurish Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) thugs. Released after 115 hours of captivity and reunited with his family, Tahseen described in vivid detail the assault that left his home destroyed, his several nights of captivity in Sadr City, and the surreal denouement of his release in front of the Iranian Embassy. He speculated that his release was due to the intervention of senior Sadrists in Najaf, who were irked that his freelancing captors had linked his kidnapping to events in Basra. End summary.

A BABY IN ONE HAND AND AN AK-47 IN THE OTHER

12. (C) Militia gunmen kidnapped Tahseen Sheikhly from his home on March 27, held him in captivity for four nights and released him late in the evening on March 31 (REF A). On April 1, Tahseen willingly agreed to debrief USMI Hostage Affairs Director Peter Ford and MNFI Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll, along with other USMI and MNFI personnel at the Rasheed Hotel.

13. (C) Late afternoon on Thursday, March 27 a gang of about 40 gunmen assaulted Tahseen's home in the eastern Baghdad neighborhood of New Baghdad, Tahseen said. Armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), the gunmen emerged from cars along the street in front of his house and a side alley. Tahseen, members of his family, and a small security detail fought back against the assailants for nearly an hour. One RPG blasted through a window, exploded inside the house and ignited a fire. Tahseen recalled firing an AK-47 with one hand and holding his six-month old grandson in the other while his daughter tried to contain the flames engulfing the house.

14. (C) The firefight ended when Tahseen's mother charged into the front yard, allowing a gunman to grab her and hold a gun to her head. Tahseen then gave himself up to the kidnappers. They threw him in a car and drove off into the city.

15. (C) Within minutes of Tahseen's departure his brother, National Police (NP) Colonel Ziad Sheikhly, arrived with a squad of NPs and took the rest of the family to safety. The family home burned to the ground. Shortly thereafter in a separate attack, Ziad's home was also torched by a militia gang.

AMATEUR THUGS WITH AN UNCERTAIN AGENDA

¶16. (C) The kidnappers took Tahseen to four different locations during the first night and two on the second night; his captors did not blindfold him so he recognized the familiar environs of New Baghdad and Sadr City in which he was held. At one point he said he was kept in an Iraqi Police (IP) checkpoint bunker before being moved to a safe house.

¶17. (C) Tahseen's captors also did not cover their own faces. He recognized several, including one youth who was his son's university classmate. He feared that their openness meant that he would likely be killed, but later he began to believe that his captors were merely a bunch of amateurs.

¶18. (C) Tahseen believed his captors were affiliated with Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM), and they wanted to use his kidnapping to further a Sadrist political agenda. The leader of the kidnappers, referred to as Abu Leyl, clumsily forced him to videotape an interview declaring that the recent actions of the GOI were nothing more than an ISCI party plot to wipe out its Sadrist rivals. However, Tahseen instead convinced him that a better idea would be for Tahseen to phone in to al-Sharqiya TV and deliver a statement calling for the Prime Minister to withdraw from Basra. In doing so, he believed he could send a more timely and obvious signal that he was being held by JAM. He now believes his ruse was successful, as he later heard that some Sadrist leaders in Najaf were angry at the fact that the kidnappers had him make such a statement.

¶19. (C) During his captivity Tahseen was permitted to make numerous calls to his brother, Ziad. His captors did not issue serious ransom demands, and repeatedly told Tahseen that his release would depend upon a "decision from Najaf."

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He engaged in personal conversations with some of his captors and at one point was lectured on shari'a law by a Shiekh Abu Ahmed. Overall, Tahseen said he was treated well during his captivity.

"JAM WANTED A BETTER SPOKESMAN) SO THEY KIDNAPPED ONE"

¶10. (C) On Monday, March 31 Tahseen received a visit from two individuals he believes were instrumental in securing his release. Yassin al-Hashimi, director of a group called Intifada Sha'abania, arrived with a Mohammed al-Nuri, who was greeted with great deference by the captors present. Tahseen was later told that al-Nuri is Moqtada al-Sadr's brother-in-law, a fact he was unaware of. These men apologized to Tahseen for what had happened and then took him by car to a point near the Iranian Embassy where his brother Ziad was waiting. Ziad coordinated with USMI and MNFI contacts to bring Tahseen into the IZ and to the Rasheed Hotel, where 22 of Tahseen and Ziad's family members had been staying after the destruction of their two homes. Former Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Chalabi's office provided funds to foot the bill at the Rasheed.

¶11. (C) Tahseen returned to work immediately after the ordeal, attending the weekly Iraq Executive Steering Committee (IESC) meeting on April 4. He easily trades jokes about his captivity; the running gag is that JAM wanted the best spokesman in Iraq -- so they kidnapped him. However, Tahseen and his family lost nearly all of their worldly possessions in the fires that ravaged their homes; rebuilding their lives will be a real challenge. Tahseen plans to relocate his family outside of Iraq in the coming months. Tahseen expresses great regret at the hardships he feels he has brought upon his family, but says he will never be deterred from his work as the public face of the new Iraqi nation.
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